

A good man in Africa: Aeneas arrives in Carthage

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This piece looks at Aeneas' landing in Carthage in the first book of Vergil's *Aeneid*, focusing on its role in developing the text's central themes. This episode brings out clearly the tension between Rome and Carthage, and also explores the many dimensions of Aeneas himself: as a leader, a lover, and a family member.

A landscape of mixed messages

Aeneas did not expect to end up in north Africa, and this is a strange environment for him and his crew, though welcome after years of tough sea-voyaging and unsuccessful landings (as narrated in *Aeneid* 3). The mixture of emotions that the place evokes is communicated to the reader through the poem's use of Aeneas as the 'focalizer' of the narrative here (i.e. the story is told from his point of view). This becomes clear in the initial description of the harbour of Carthage:

There is a place where a harbour is formed by an island blocking the mouth of a long sound. As the waves come in from the open sea and break on the sides of this island, they are divided into the deep inlets of the bay. Rock cliffs are everywhere. A great pinnacle threatens the sky on either side, and beneath all this the broad water lies still and safe. At the end of the bay there rises a back-cloth of shimmering trees, a dark wood with quivering shadows, looming over the water, and there, at the foot of this scene, is a cave of hanging rocks, a home for the nymphs, with fresh spring water inside it and seats in the virgin rock. (1. 159–68)

The great harbour of ancient Carthage was its most important physical feature; for contemporary readers of the poem, it was the main reason for the city's recent re-foundation by Augustus a decade before the *Aeneid* as a colony for retired soldiers. As often, a location in the poem's mythic plot means something real to an Augustan reader: Aeneas' temporary visit to Carthage looks forward to Rome's permanent mastery of the city under Augustus.

However, Vergil's description com-

bines aspects of menace (cliffs, pinnacles, shadows) with more positive qualities (safe water for the ships, a decorative landscape with trees, caves, and fresh water). This nicely conveys the ambiguity of their future stay in Carthage for the Trojans: this will be a luxurious and refreshing year's stopover on their journey, but Carthage is after all the vicious ancestral enemy of Rome for Vergil's readers: we are in at the foundation of the city which nearly destroyed Rome in the Punic Wars. The hints of danger here will be more than fulfilled as the Trojan mission nearly comes to a grinding halt owing to Aeneas' involvement with Dido. In this context, the cave mentioned above surely looks forward to that of book 4 where Aeneas and Dido fatally get it together during a rain-break in hunting.

The ideal leader

Next we find Aeneas energetically following the Roman military leader's manual. In short order he gets his lieutenant Achates to get a fire going, toasts grain from his remaining supplies, and surveys the sea from a high vantage point to see if he can find his lost ships. He then sees and slaughters some deer to provide venison for his men, and they sit down to a good meal with wine brought from Sicily, their last landfall. At that meal he addresses his men with a suitable military pep-talk, telling them that they have been through worse and will look back with pleasure at their current hardships.

But immediately the poet lets us know that these cheery words don't in fact match Aeneas' true feelings; he is naturally anxious about his supposedly lost comrades and what to do next, and has just lied to the troops to encourage them:

These were his words, but he was sick with all his cares. He showed

them the face of hope and kept his misery deep in his heart. (1. 208–9)

Modern readers might see this as politician-style economy with the truth, but for Romans the suppression of personal emotion (and almost anything else) in the interest of the state was a key virtue, not for leaders but for every citizen: in Cicero's words, the Roman is 'born not for himself but for his country'. This is the same self-sacrificing move Aeneas will make with Dido: his personal feelings are put second to the need of the Trojans to leave and go to Italy. The reader is left to work out for him/herself whether this is a satisfactory outcome.

Meeting Mother

The last scene in the sequence I am considering narrates Aeneas' meeting with his mother in disguise. This brings out the point that divine parentage can be an ambivalent benefit, and again stresses that Aeneas often feels depressed and isolated. After a restless night, Aeneas reconnoitres again in the woods, where he meets an attractive young woman:

Looking like a Spartan girl out hunting, wearing the dress of a Spartan girl and carrying her weapons ... she had a light bow hanging from her shoulders in hunting style, her hair was unbound and streaming in the wind, and her flowing dress was caught up above the knee. 'Hey there, soldiers' she called out to them. (1. 315–21)

This young woman breaks all the rules for good Roman girls, who should ideally stay demurely at home and work wool: she is out of the house and hunting, loose hair and bare legs, speaking first to strange men. The dress above the knee suggests a famous pose of Roman statues of Diana, a splendid irony as of course this girl is Venus in disguise – not the goddess of hunting and virginity but the goddess of sex, quite the opposite. Her appearance is in fact highly erotic for ancient male readers, and Aeneas seems to be affected by this, since he addresses her with an elaborate compliment:

Surely you must be a goddess? Are you Diana, sister of Apollo? Are you one of the sister nymphs? Be gracious to us, whoever you may be, and lighten our distress.

(1. 328–30)

Though chatting up your mother in disguise might seem a little bizarre to us, this element of sex has its role in the plot of Vergil's poem, since Aeneas is being 'warmed up' erotically for his coming meeting with Dido, with whom Venus has agreed that he should fall in love. This seems heartless to us, as Venus knows Aeneas must leave Dido behind eventually, but perhaps some motherly care is intended. Venus provides her widowed son with the love of a good woman after years of singledom, even if only for a while, and in this scene prepares him to re-enter the sexual arena.

The loneliness of the long-distance imperialist

There are hints in Aeneas' words that he senses the girl's divine status, but no suggestion that he has recognised his mother. Venus' maintenance of her disguise thus allows her son to chat her up and warm up for Dido, but here her role as goddess of sex seems to overcome other caring aspects of her role as mother. And though Venus goes on to give Aeneas all sorts of useful information about the country he has landed in and the interesting past history of its queen (Dido avenged her murdered husband on her treacherous brother), and encourages Aeneas by recounting a (presumably fictional) good omen, she fails to reveal her disguise before the moment when she disappears:

As she hastened away, he recognised her as his mother and called after her: 'Why do you so often mock your own son by taking on these disguises? You too are cruel. Why am I never allowed to take your hand in mine, to hear your true voice and speak to you as you really are?'

(1. 407–9)

The two evidently have some ongoing communication problems, and, as elsewhere in the poem, Aeneas is deprived of the normal comforts and conversations of family life. His contact with his divine mother is unsatisfactory, he loses a wife and a lover in his travels (Creusa at Troy and Dido at Carthage), his only child Ascanius is too young to share his troubles, and his father Anchises, his only real confidant, dies just before his arrival in Carthage. Here, as in so many ways, his landing in Carthage sets the scene for the rest of the poem: as we have seen, Aeneas' mission demands many sacrifices, and the mark of the good Roman leader is to put his personal goals and feelings second to

the greater good of the community. Modern readers, more interested in individual fulfilment than collective success, might take a more complex view.

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